

Patch Testing at the Dermatology Resource Unit Christchurch Hospital

Patch Testing Clinic

Dermatology Patient Information Line **0300 019 5471**

Dermatology Appointments **0300 019 4740** (Option 4)

This leaflet is for patients who have been referred to the Dermatology Resource Unit at Christchurch Hospital, for patch testing, usually due to a type of eczema that can cause red, itchy and scaly skin, known as contact dermatitis.

Contact dermatitis can affect any part of the body, and can be caused by:

- an irritant (a substance that damages the skin physically), or
- an allergen (a substance that causes the immune system to respond in a way that affects the skin)

Contact dermatitis caused by irritants is more common, causing up to 8 out of 10 cases.

What is patch testing?

When allergic contact dermatitis is considered to be a contributing cause of your eczema, patch testing is used to try and help identify, which substances may be provoking an allergic reaction.

It does not identify food or inhalant allergies (e.g. pollen) or allergies to oral medications.

It does not diagnose substances that cause irritation to your skin.

What will I be tested to?

You will usually be tested to around 50 different substances. These are considered to be amongst the most common causes of contact dermatitis in the UK. They include, for example, compounds such as nickel, preservatives found in creams and shampoos, perfumes and rubber chemicals. Additional substances may also be included depending on the suspected cause or location of your dermatitis.

Patch testing is not the same as skin prick testing, therefore you will not be tested for allergies relating to house dust mites, pets, pollen or food.

No injections are involved, instead adhesive patch test tapes are used and these may feel a little restrictive and unusual to have on

Are there any reasons why I can not be patch tested?

We are unable to offer patch testing if you:

- are currently pregnant or breastfeeding
- have extensive eczema on your back and/or upper arms
- have had sun exposure or used a sun bed over the previous 4 weeks on the area being patch tested e.g. back and upper arms
- If you are on a moderate to high dose of steroids (over 10 mg per day)
- If you are taking any medication that lowers your immune system. If you are unsure please contact the Unit for advice.
- If you have extensive tattoos that cover the majority of your back and upper arms. Please contact the Unit for further advice.

What must I do before being patch tested?

Ideally any eczema you may have should be as well controlled as possible before being tested.

- **Moisturisers** - Do not apply any moisturisers, bath oil, creams, lotions, ointments etc, to your back and upper arms, two days prior to your appointment.
- **Medication** - If you are on a course of systemic steroids (tablets &/or injections), or medication that lowers your immune system, please contact the patch test nurse for advice, before you attend your first appointment, as they may affect your test results.

Try not to use anti-histamines, 48 hours prior and during the test period. However, if you are unable to manage without them during this time, then we request that you try to minimise their use.

- **Topical Steroids** - The use of potent topical steroids or topical immunomodulators (e.g. Protopic or Elidel) should not have been applied to the test area (back and upper arms) at least 3-4 days prior to the application of the test. However, you can continue to use them elsewhere on your body.
- **Exposure to ultraviolet rays** - Do not expose your back and upper arms to the sun or use sunbeds for at least four weeks prior to the test, (and then also during).
- **Artificial suntan lotion** - Do not use sun tanning lotion at least 2 weeks prior to your appointment to your back and upper arms.
- **Body Hair** - To enable the patches to adhere to the skin the test area (commonly the upper back) needs to be free from body hair. If required and able to do so, please remove any excessive hair growth by gently shaving this area 2 to 3 days before your appointment. Do not use epilators, waxing, sugaring or depilation creams to achieve this.
- **Clothing** - If possible, wear open fronted clothing which is loose fitting. This means that they can be put on and removed without pulling over the head, reducing the likelihood of dislodging the patches. You may also want to wear older darker clothing since there is a minimal risk of staining from the patches and/or skin marker ink.

How should I care for my Patch Test once it has been applied?

- **Bathing** - You will be asked to refrain from having a bath or shower throughout the test period (Monday through Friday), so that the patches do not become dampened. This reduces the likelihood of:
 - the patches lifting off and/or diluting the test compounds, making them ineffective.
 - the test markings being washed away
 - the test area from becoming cross contaminated.
- **Exercise and physical exertion** - Do not do activities which may cause you to sweat excessively, as this will make the patches damp and may result in lifting. You may need to arrange matters at work to accommodate this, as well as ensuring any personal events/sport activities etc are postponed during your week of testing.
- Do not expose your back to the sun or sunbeds during this procedure.
- It may help to wear a T-shirt or vest to sleep, in order to help keep the patches in place.
- You will also require someone to check your patches regularly to make sure that they are adhering to your skin; this may require using paper tape such as 'Micropore' to help secure the patches in place.
- If one of the whole patches comes off do not reapply, just make a note of the day and time it fell off.
- Unbearable irritation from one of the patch test substances is rare. If you experience this you can remove the chamber causing the irritation by asking someone to help cut this away from the test strip, whilst trying not to dislodge the surrounding chambers. How best to do this will be discussed with you when you attend.

What can I expect to happen at each appointment?

1. On your first visit.

A brief discussion about the test and relevant paperwork will be completed. After which with your consent, hypoallergenic strips of tape called patches are applied and marked out onto your back and/or upper arms, using a purple skin marker. On each strip usually there are 10 chambers which contain a small amount of the substances you are being tested to:

- These substances are diluted to avoid severe reactions.

- They are required to stay on for 48 hours, after which they are removed during your second visit.
- During this test you may develop localised eczema or irritant reactions underneath the patches.
- Please allow 1 to 1 ½ hours for your attendance.

2. The second visit (48 hours later).

This is when the patch locations are remarked using a purple skin marker.

The patches are then removed and any reactions are noted.

The patch test site may feel itchy. This is normal.

You will need to continue to keep the patch test area dry and away from ultraviolet ray exposure.

Please allow up to 30 minutes for your attendance.

3. The third visit (96 hours later).

This is when the test areas will be examined and any reactions discussed with you by the doctor. Information about any allergens that are identified and considered relevant will be provided.

The site may continue to feel itchy, this is normal.

Please allow 1 to 2 hours for your attendance.

4. Potential fourth visit (144 hours later).

This is not commonly required. However, it is possible that a further reading may need to be taken before the test is complete or further testing may be appropriate, but this will be discussed if necessary during your third visit.

The site may continue to feel itchy, this is normal.

Please allow 30 minutes to 1 hour for your attendance.

Should I bring anything along to the clinic?

You may be asked to bring along some of the products you use at home or at work, to be included in your test. If this has been requested of you, please telephone the Unit to discuss this with the patch test nurse, well in advance of your appointment. This is because not all products or items are appropriate for testing and sometimes further research or special orders may have to be made on your behalf, prior to your attendance.

All products however, must be clearly labelled, in date, uncontaminated by other products and whenever possible with original packaging information. If the products are related to your line of work, you may need to provide applicable data safety information.

We are unable to test against plant material, food and drinks, medications that are injected or swallowed or products that are not formulated to be left on the skin after application or exposure, such as cleaning products.

What side effects may occur?

Most common reactions are:

- **Skin reddening and itching at the application site** - from both positive test results and/or irritant reactions. This usually disappears after a few days. A positive patch test may cause a blister.

Other side effects are less common, but include:

- **Persistent reaction** - some positive test reactions, e.g. to gold, may persist for up to a month.
- **Flare of eczema** - a positive patch test may be accompanied by a flare of existing or previous eczema.
- **Excited Skin Syndrome** - some strong positive test reactions can cause the skin to become hyper-reactive, in which other patch test sites also become reactive when they would not normally be expected to do so.
- **Pigment change** - an increase or decrease in pigment may be seen at the site of patch tests, which may last for months or rarely (1 in 1,000) be permanent.
- **Infection** - this is rare.

- **Scarring** - very rare (1 in 10,000).
- **Allergy** - rarely, in about 1 in 5,000 patch tests, you may become allergic to one of the substances applied during patch testing. In practice this does not seem to cause a problem in the long term.
- Although hypoallergenic tape is used, occasionally people react to all areas in contact with the tape.
- It has also been reported that some patients have experienced an anaphylactoid reaction (or shock) from certain test compounds, for example antibiotics. This however, is considered exceptionally rare.

What happens if I get a positive reaction?

The chemicals used in patch testing have been diluted in strength, if you are not allergic to the chemicals used in your patch test, it is hoped that they will not cause any irritant reactions and your skin will remain as before.

However, if you are found to be allergic to one or more compounds used in your test, it will be shown by your skin producing eczema at the test site. The positive reaction can vary in strength from a mild red patch through to red itchy eczema, which potentially may blister. Any areas that react strongly can be treated with steroid ointment once the test is completed.

On your final visit, if you are informed that you have had a positive allergic reaction, information about that allergen will be provided. It will be advised that you endeavour to strictly avoid sources of this allergen, for example by checking the ingredients of cosmetics. It is then, hoped that by eliminating contact with the offending chemical your dermatitis will improve.

What if I am unable to keep the appointments or fail to attend?

It is important to attend all three appointments, to complete the test. If you know that you will be unable to attend, please telephone the Unit as soon as possible. Failure to attend your appointment not only means that the test set up for you will have to be disposed of at cost; but also it would have denied another patient the opportunity to have had the test carried out.

If you have not informed the patch test clinic to cancel your appointment in time, and fail to attend, we will not offer you another appointment and your GP will be informed.

May we thank you for your assistance in this matter, as we try to ensure our clinic's appointments are utilised to the full

Where can I get further information?

You may find the following British Association of Dermatologists website helpful:

www.skinhealthinfo.org.uk

What are the Dermatology contact details?

Patch Test Clinic, Dermatology Resource Unit, Christchurch Hospital,
Fairmile Road, Christchurch. Dorset. BH23 2JX

Telephone: **0300 019 5471**

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